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THE INTERMEDIATE UNIT OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION.

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A 2-YEAR STUDY IN WISCONSIN WAS MADE TO DETERMINE IF AN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE UNIT BETWEEN THE STATE AND LOCAL DISTRICTS WAS NEEDED, IF NEEDED, WHETHER THEIR COUNTY SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENT STRUCTURE WAS ADEQUATE, AND TO DEVELOP CRITERIA FOR THE TYPE OF INTERMEDIATE ADMINISTRATIVE UNIT NEEDED IF THEIRS WAS INADEQUATE. NINE ASSUMPTIONS FOR THE STUDY WERE LISTED. DATA WERE COLLECTED FROM THE LITERATURE ON THE INTERMEDIATE UNIT OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION AND BY PERSONAL INTERVIEWS AND QUESTIONNAIRES FROM ALL COUNTY SUPERINTENDENTS OF SCHOOLS, ALL ADMINISTRATORS OF LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS WHICH EMPLOYED THREE OR MORE TEACHERS, ALL MEMBERS OF THE STATE DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION WHO HAD A SPECIFIC RELATIONSHIP TO PUBLIC SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION, AND A SELECTED GROUP OF LAY CITIZENS. THE STUDY INDICATED THAT AN INTERMEDIATE ADMINISTRATIVE UNIT WAS NEEDED, BUT THAT THEIR COUNTY SCHOOL SUPERINTENDENCY WAS NOT ADEQUATE. NINE CRITERIA FOR DEVELOPING SATISFACTORY INTERMEDIATE ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS IN WISCONSIN WERE LISTED. THE AUTHOR STATED THAT THE STUDY HAS RELEVANCE FOR MANY OTHER STATES HAVING SIMILAR PATTERNS OF SCHOOL ORGANIZATION. THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED IN THE "ADMINISTRATOR'S NOTEBOOK, " VOLUME 8, NUMBER 2, OCTOBER 1959. (RB)

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The Intermediate Unit of School Administration

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The changing nature of local school districts and the ever increasing educational demands of modern society give rise to many questions regarding appropriate organization for public education. Are present school districts adequate to satisfy existing educational needs? Should there be an intermediate unit of educational administration to assist local districts in providing optimum programs of education? Is the present county superintendency an effective service agency to local districts?

A majority of the states have developed administrative organizations for public education which involve three levels of administrative responsibility--state, intermediate, and local. The intermediate level of administration usually has been in the form of the county superintendency and was instituted about a hundred years ago when societal conditions were predominately rural, when demands upon the schools were relatively simple, and when many small local school districts existed. Its original functions were those of providing general supervision for rural elementary schools and reporting on the conditions of local schools to the state department of education.

Although much study and improvement of local school district organization has been accomplished, it has been only during the last decade that any concerted attention has been given to the intermediate level of organization and administration for public education.[1] In these days of rapidly changing educational demands, it seems imperative that careful attention be given to all levels of educational organization. Our nation can ill afford to retain any outmoded and ineffective form of educational organization.

The Wisconsin Investigation

Educational leaders often have pointed out weaknesses of the Wisconsin organizational structure for the provision of public education. As has been true in other states, local district organization has been improved substantially but there has been little or no fundamental change in the county superintendency. In 1954, the Wisconsin Association of County Superintendents officially requested the University of Wisconsin and the State Department of Public Instruction to conduct an investigation which could be anticipated to provide a basis for intelligent judgments concerning the future role of the county superintendency in that state. Discussion of the problem indicated that it was one in which all educational groups, as well as many leading lay citizens, were interested. Financial support was obtained from the Midwest Administration Center of the University of Chicago, as well as from the various organizations of Wisconsin school administrators, and a two-year research study was launched during the 1954-55 school year.[2]

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The study was planned under the general direction of a 15-member policy committee made up of representatives of the University of Wisconsin; the State Department of Public Instruction; the Midwest Administration Center; and the state associations of county superintendents, local school administrators, and secondary and elementary principals. This committee met almost monthly during the period of the study. It developed the general policies to guide the study and approved the research design and procedures which were developed by a research committee.

Assumptions Underlying the Study

Two types of assumptions were made: first, those relating to the general framework of the study, and second, those relating to the nature of the data to be collected.

Assumptions relating to the general framework of the study were: (1) education is a function of the state, (2) the established precedent of local school autonomy should be maintained, (3) reasonable equality of educational opportunity should be provided to all school-age youth, (4) educational services should be provided from sources as near the local school as is consistent with adequacy and reasonable cost, (5) the educational organization should be conducive to the development and exercise of educational leadership, and (6) Wisconsin would continue the development of community-type local school districts.

Assumptions relating to the nature of the data to be collected included: (1) local school administrators, county superintendents, members of the state department of public instruction, and selected lay citizens are capable of making sound appraisals of the importance, availability, quality, and source of educational services provided for the public schools, (2) opinion responses received on questionnaires and in personal interviews are indicative of the true judgments of the above groups of respondents, and (3) combined majority opinion of the populations studied is an adequate basis for testing the hypotheses of the study.

Hypotheses Which Were Tested

Two major hypotheses, as well as a number of minor ones, were tested in the investigation. The two major hypotheses were stated positively because action on the second one was dependent upon previous action on the first one. The first hypothesis was: *An administrative unit between the state and the local districts is needed to aid in providing an optimum educational program.* If this hypothesis were accepted, then the second hypothesis was: *The county school superintendency as now constituted is adequate to aid in providing for an optimum educational program.* If this hypothesis were rejected and the conclusion reached that the county superintendency was not adequate, then it was to become a purpose of the investigation to develop criteria for the type of intermediate administrative unit that would aid local school districts in providing an optimum educational program.

The hypotheses were tested in the light of two sources of data. One source was the literature relating to the need for and the status of the intermediate unit of educational administration and the other was the information and opinions obtained from educational and lay leaders in Wisconsin. Questions put to the Wisconsin respondents sought to determine "what is" at the present time and "what should be" in the future in order to insure optimum local educational programs. The exploration of "what is" and "what should be" was directed primarily into the following four aspects of the intermediate unit of educational administration: functions, administrative structure, size and geographical area, and financial support.

Sources of Data

The Wisconsin population from which facts and/or opinions were solicited included all county superintendents of schools (72), all administrators of local school districts which employed three or more teachers (770), all members of the State Department of Public Instruction who had a specific relationship to public school administration (30), and a selected group of lay citizens composed of members of county school committees, members of the Wisconsin White-House Conference on Education, and persons in leadership positions in organized citizen groups of the state (425). Data were collected from all county superintendents by personal interviews and by questionnaires. Usable responses to lengthy questionnaires were received from 552 local administrators (71.7 per cent), 30 members of the State Department of Public Instruction (100 per cent), and 258 lay

citizens (60.7 per cent). Eighty-six per cent of all administrators of local districts which operated secondary schools responded while 54 per cent of the administrators of local districts which operated only elementary schools responded. There was a 75 per cent return, however, from all administrators of elementary school districts which employed eight or more teachers.

Some Major Findings

The first major hypothesis, *an administrative unit between the state and the local school districts is needed to aid in providing an optimum educational program*, was accepted for the State of Wisconsin. Both the data gathered and the literature relating to the intermediate unit of educational administration strongly supported this hypothesis.

The second major hypothesis, *the county school superintendency as now constituted is adequate to aid in providing an optimum educational program*, was rejected. The Wisconsin data and the literature relating to the county superintendency clearly indicated the inadequacy of the county superintendency as now constituted. A large proportion of the local school districts in Wisconsin are not effective in providing modern educational programs at economical costs per pupil. In general, the present county intermediate units do not make adequate provisions for educational services and leadership which are needed by these districts. Even though continued reorganization of school districts tends to eliminate very small districts, there is ample evidence that in the foreseeable future a large majority of Wisconsin school districts will have need for assistance and services which can best be provided by an adequate intermediate unit of educational administration.

Educational Services Needed

There is an obvious need in a majority of Wisconsin school districts for improved availability and quality of a wide range of educational services. The need is especially evident with respect to technical and specialized services, such as school site and building services, counseling services, and legal consultation services. Specialized instruction for physically or mentally handicapped children is an additional area of great need. While the primary provider of each of the different types of services should be the local school district, only the largest districts presently are capable of providing the range and quality of services needed. Greater participation of the intermediate unit in the provision of educational services to most school districts is indicated.

Competent Leadership Essential

The conclusion that the intermediate unit of educational administration should provide educational leadership of outstanding quality was supported by a majority of all groups of respondents. A large majority of local school administrators indicated that they would accept gladly the leadership of competent intermediate superintendents of schools. Although leadership is currently a legally assigned function of Wisconsin county superintendents, the leadership exercized by them was rated only average to above average by both county superintendents and local school administrators. This situation is not surprising when the limitations which face the county superintendency are considered. In Wisconsin the county superintendent is elected by popular vote. There is no governing board of education. Consequently, the county superintendent must request the county board of supervisors to provide most of the funds for financing the activities of the county superintendency of schools. As a result, finances necessary for providing the number and quality of professional personnel required to furnish quality services and effective leadership is unavailable in many counties. The county superintendents themselves frequently do not possess the professional qualifications essential for providing the quality of leadership demanded of the intermediate unit.

Guides for the Future

The State of Wisconsin should be organized into satisfactory intermediate units of educational administration. All territory of the state, including many school districts that are presently independent, should be included in some intermediate unit. Since local districts with an enrollment of 10,000 or more pupils may be able to provide most of the educational services needed, such districts may be permitted to remain independent of the intermediate unit. These districts, however, should be included in the intermediate unit for tax purposes and should be entitled to use those intermediate services for which they

have particular needs.

The following criteria should be applied in developing satisfactory intermediate administrative units in Wisconsin:

1. The major functions of the intermediate unit should be providing high quality educational leadership and educational services to local school districts, performing liaison and reporting functions between the State Department of Public Instruction and local districts, and offering specialized instructional programs which the districts cannot provide.

2. There should be a minimum enrollment of 10,000 pupils in the public schools of the area included in an intermediate unit. Under unusual conditions of topography or sparsity of population, it may be necessary to accept a somewhat smaller enrollment.

3. The boundaries of the intermediate unit should be coterminous with the outer boundaries of a logical combination of local school districts which are to constitute the area of the intermediate unit. There should be no required relationship between the boundaries of the intermediate unit and the boundaries of the counties.

4. Each intermediate unit should be under the direct control of a board of education elected at large by the residents of the intermediate unit. The board would appoint the intermediate superintendent and determine his salary and tenure. It would adopt policies to govern the operation of the intermediate unit, employ the necessary personnel upon recommendation of the superintendent, and appraise the effectiveness of the policies as they are carried out by the employed personnel.

5. The intermediate board of education should be fiscally independent. It should have independent taxing power and the authority to determine its own budget. State funds should be made available to intermediate units and the distribution of these funds should be determined in part by the educational need and financial ability of the various units.

6. The intermediate superintendent should be a person with sufficient qualifications and competence to earn and deserve high professional recognition by administrators of all types of local school districts. In order to obtain a superintendent of such quality, an intermediate board of education should not be limited in its choice of a superintendent by residence requirements.

7. The legal functions of the intermediate unit should be defined as clearly as practicable. This unit should have the authority for those functions assigned to it by law.

8. The basic orientation of the intermediate unit should be that of providing assistance to the local school districts. It should also have responsibilities to the State Department of Public Instruction.

9. Both in structure and functions the intermediate unit should be sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing educational conditions and needs. There should be legal provisions for the reorganizations of intermediate units similar to those presently applicable to local districts. As local districts become capable of providing more of their own services, it should be possible for an intermediate unit to discontinue a function no longer needed and to assume another which changing conditions indicate to be desirable.

Implications for Other States

While this research has been concerned particularly with the intermediate unit in Wisconsin, it has relevance for many other states having similar patterns of school organization. Certain of the aforementioned guidelines have been effected in some states for years. Adoption of only one or two of these criteria, however, has resulted in intermediate units that still are much less than satisfactory.

The county superintendency, as constituted in several states, is merely a vestige of an earlier era in school organization and it can no longer be defended in its present form. Marked by the popular election of the superintendent, low salary, inadequate finances, conflicting roles, and ineffective leadership, the present status of this office should not be perpetuated.[3] It is evident that many states should give serious consideration to implementing all of the criteria resulting from the investigation in Wisconsin in an effort to strengthen the intermediate level of school organization.

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[1] Robert M. Isenberg (ed.), *The Community School and the Intermediate Unit*, Yearbook 1954, Department of Rural Education (Washington, D. C.: NEA), chap. vi.

[2] Russell T. Gregg and George E. Watson, Coordinators, *The County Superintendency in Wisconsin: A Study of the Intermediate Unit of Educational Administration with Particular Reference to Wisconsin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1957). 313 pp. (Mimeographed.)

[3] Harlan D. Beem, "The County Superintendent Needs Help," *Administrator's Notebook*, Vol. II, No. 9 (May, 1954), 4 pp.